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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000255

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF, INR/B
HANOI FOR CDC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV PREL KIRF VM HIV AIDS RELFREE

SUBJECT: HO CHI MINH CITY OPENS THE DOOR TO CATHOLIC CHARITABLE
WORK IN HIV/AIDS CARE

REF: A) HCMC 0075 B) HCMC 0153 C) 02 HCMC 0963 D) 03
HANOI 1257

1. (SBU) In a small dinner on March 1 at his 100-year-old residence, Cardinal Pham Minh Man, Archbishop of HCMC, told the Consul General that he had just received a letter from Ho Chi Minh City authorities seeking assistance in dealing with the growing HIV/AIDS problem. The letter, signed by the Director of the HCMC Department of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs (DOLISA), asked the Cardinal to provide 150 nuns to staff four HIV/AIDS treatment centers. The Cardinal was clearly pleased at this sudden softening of the government's stance on social welfare activities, but planned to approach the DOLISA proposal with caution, particularly concerning the matter of training. In meetings with several staffelds and other U.S. visitors over the past few months, the Cardinal had lamented government limitations on charitable works, matters he felt the Church should be able to manage on its own. He had said it was sometimes easier for Catholics to simply take on charitable activities than to have the Church officially seek permission. One example he had provided to Staffdel McCormick in January was that of an HIV/AIDS hospice run by nuns in Cu Chi District (ref A). While he had helped the nuns acquire a vehicle, he was not otherwise officially involved. (Note: During one of Staffdel McCormick's other meetings in HCMC, HIV/AIDS officials had actually mentioned the hospice as a positive development. End note.)

2. (SBU) In a steady series of meetings with USG visitors since his elevation to Cardinal in September 2003, Cardinal Man had been generally positive on the growth of the church - approximately 7000 new converts each year since 1998. Government-imposed restrictions on the numbers of seminarians and priests remained a primary concern, as evidenced by the fact that only 19 seminarians would be graduating from the seminary this year to fill over 50 vacancies in the Achdiocese, while another 250 young men waited for places in an incoming class. Confiscated properties were another item high on the agenda, as the Cardinal announced his intention to continue seeking the return of former churches, schools, and other buildings. He did not expect the GVN to return all of the 200 properties confiscated in the years since 1975, but expressed resentment that in some cases the GVN was still utilizing properties it had officially returned to the Church. The Cardinal told the Consul General over dinner that he was excited at the prospect of regaining an old HCMC seminary property in June 2004, and said he was laying the groundwork for the government to allow the building to be converted into a "museum of (Catholic) faith."

3. (SBU) Meeting with Staffdel Eikenberg in January, Cardinal Man said he had repeatedly told the GVN that limited freedom was not true freedom and that freedom of religion meant more than just going to church. He stressed the need to find those who were blocking positive change within the Communist Party and help them overcome their objections. Still, he did not blame national policies for the repression, but rather "the system". He thought that some Communists in the South, at least, were good people who would like to make changes but were not part of the system. Others, however, feared losing power and authority if the people were allowed more freedom. He noted that many Communist cadre children were enrolled in a popular Catholic kindergarten run by nuns in HCMC, and hoped those children would teach their parents about religion. He also saw the increase in wealth and contact with the outside world as positive changes in Vietnam, which would stimulate change. Cardinal Man expressed his appreciation to several visitors for the support he had received from the Consulate General and the USG.

4. (SBU) Cardinal Man also spoke of reconciliation and dialogue with the GVN during his meeting with a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (CIRFDEL) in January (ref B). While he said there were differences of opinion within the Catholic community on how much to accommodate the GVN, he thought very few would support the use of force to achieve their objectives. To demonstrate the many small steps religious groups could take to protect their interests, he mentioned a meeting he had organized to discuss the Fatherland Front's patriotic association for priests. After warning the priests in his Archdiocese of the dangers of getting involved in political activities of any sort without permission from their bishops, many priests had left the fledgling group. In an interesting aside, he

advised the CIRFDEL to focus on China, noting that changes in China would bring change to Vietnam as well. The Cardinal told the group he foresaw a negative reaction from the GVN to Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation in the short-term, but thought it might be beneficial in the long-term. (Note: Well-known activist and Redemptorist priest, Father Chan Tin, criticized the Cardinal in his own meeting with the CIRFDEL for not supporting Father Ly and for sending out a pastoral letter warning of "false prophets," but thought the Cardinal had recently started to work harder for religious freedom. End note.)

15. (SBU) The Cardinal recounted for Staffdel McCormick his meeting in late December 2003 with Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan. He said he had utilized the meeting to encourage the GVN to ensure that the new law on religion authorized religious groups to open schools and take a more active role in combating "social evils." He was clearly dissatisfied with the present system of "asking and receiving," but did not seem hopeful the Church would be given the green light to engage freely in charitable works in any new legislation. Man also briefed Staffdel McCormick on meetings in the U.S. in September 2003 with Catholic leaders from several educational institutions, including Boston College and Loyola University of Chicago, to discuss overseas training opportunities. On the night of the Consul General's dinner, a Vice President of Boston College happened to be visiting as well, exploring opportunities for sponsoring nuns to receive nursing training in the U.S. The Cardinal also introduced the Consul General to two priests whom he hoped to send to the U.S. for studies related to pastoral music.

16. (SBU) Note: Cardinal Pham Minh Man received his MBA from Loyola Marymount University in 1971. Before his investiture as Archbishop of HCMC in April 1998, he served as the Bishop of My Tho Diocese in the Mekong Delta. The Vatican appointed Archbishop Man to the rank of Cardinal on September 28, 2003, and he was officially elevated in Rome on October 21. Then-Bishop Man was a compromise choice for HCMC Archbishop back in 1998, when the Vatican attempted to appoint the Bishop of Phan Thiet, Huynh Van Nghi, as Apostolic Administrator to the city over the objections of the GVN, which insisted on Father Huynh Cong Minh, one of the founders of the Patriotic Committee for Catholic Solidarity. The GVN may have believed that the Vatican was trying to appoint Bishop Nghi as Apostolic Administrator to allow them to name exiled priest Nguyen Van Thuan (the now-deceased Cardinal Francis Xavier Thuan -- reftel C) as Archbishop in absentia. End note.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Cardinal Man is generally willing to speak openly about Church issues, his dealings with the GVN, and his assessment of the situation for Catholics in Vietnam. While he uses coded language on occasion, his often pointed remarks make clear his dissatisfaction with GVN controls on the social and educational activities of the Church. For now, at least, it does not appear that any sense of compromise with the GVN over his recent elevation has led him to temper his views, or his willingness to discuss them (reftel D). His measured response to the request from the city to take on a very visible charitable function is in keeping with his general approach, but this is clearly a major step forward for the Church in HCMC under his stewardship. He was clearly pleased to have been "invited" to provide assistance, but he also noted that providing care for HIV/AIDS patients was something "nobody else really wanted to do." Should the Cardinal decide to provide the "nunpower" for this project, Post will work with Embassy CDC Office to find training opportunities to offer him and the city.

YAMAUCHI